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SUBJECT: GOING ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAINST ISLAMOPHOBIA

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

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Summary  
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¶1. (SBU) The International Conference on Islamophobia accused "the West" of an irrational fear of Islam. Most speakers provided anecdotal evidence of hostile actions towards Muslims, including Turkey's ban against headscarves in public institutions. A small minority of speakers raised the need to address Western concerns regarding the Islamic world. Conference participants proposed going on the offensive to directly counter anti-Islamic acts as well as lawsuits against "perpetrators of Islamophobia," and social and economic exclusion as a blueprint to combat Islamophobia. The counterattack strategy espoused by conference organizers and speakers clearly resonated with the audience and has a good chance of directing attention away from needed social and political reforms in the Islamic world.

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"Islamophobia is Embedded in the West"  
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¶2. (U) Participants at the International Conference on Islamophobia, held in Istanbul on December 8-9, painted a picture of Western publics and governments engaging in a deliberate, hostile campaign against Islam. The speakers, who represented a wide cross-section of Islamic Scholars throughout the world, were nearly unanimous in declaring that Islamophobia is deeply rooted in the West and used numerous examples of Western intolerance and discrimination -- ranging from the Crusades to the Danish Cartoon controversy -- to highlight what they characterized as the West's irrational fear of Islam. Islamophobia was described as "more serious" in the wake of the September 11th attacks and the War on Terror. Many speakers accused U.S. and other Western leaders of manipulating fear of Islam to justify wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well as domestic legislation that discriminates against Muslims.

¶3. (U) In his keynote address, Secretary General of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Professor Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu called Western supporters of the offensive Danish cartoon "extremists of freedom expression," equating them with al-Qaeda. Another keynote speaker, British author Karen Armstrong, opined to great applause that the West is deeply

Islamophobic. She blamed the 9/11 attacks on the U.S., stating the attacks proved the West failed to learn the lessons of the 20th century. Speakers throughout the conference espoused this line of thought with little opposition. Some speakers highlighted positive steps by the West, but most focused on examples of inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric or actions.

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"Headscarf ban as a form of Islamophobia"  
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14. (U) Necati Ceylan President of the Turkish Foundation for Volunteer Organizations (TGTV) (which helped organize the controversial International Jerusalem Meeting) cited the ban against wearing headscarves in Turkish state institutions as form of Islamophobia. The media fosters "the fear of the headscarf" and also is guilty of Islamophobia, according to Ceylan. Fatma Benli, President of the Women's Rights Society Against Discrimination, called the headscarf ban a human rights violation. Benli cited a recent poll that showed 69 percent of Turkish women wear the headscarf as evidence that the majority of Turkish women have their rights infringed by the state. According to Benli, the bans came into effect in the last decade only because headscarf wearing women were becoming more visible in expensive shops or as wives of politicians. Those who have an irrational fear of Islam turned the headscarf into a political issue, associating wearing the "turban" with a political act, Benli argued.

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Limited Calls for Self Examination  
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15. (U) Nearly all the speakers blamed Islamophobia entirely on external causes, obviating the need for discussion of internal reforms. A notable exception was Tariq Ramadan, a

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Swiss professor and theologian, who argued that the West has legitimate questions regarding Islam. Ramadan argued Islamic scholars should disavow Sudan's recent arrest of a kindergarten teacher arrested for naming a toy bear Mohammed.

Ramadan feared participants would leave the conference feeling victimized, thus eliminating the need to have a critical discussion within Islam. Although she dedicated most of her remarks to the headscarf issue, Benli also criticized restrictions on women in Muslim societies, drawing spontaneous applause from many in the audience. Iqbal Unus, Director of the Fairfax Institute, a division of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, argued Islamophobes were not necessarily anti-Islam; they simply had limited knowledge of the religion drawn from sensationalist media fed by acts from extremists elements within Islam. Unus encouraged his audience to work against extremist elements. These examples were in stark contrast to a two day barrage that presented the Islamic world as a victim of a ferocious attack by the West.

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A Blueprint to Counterattack  
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16. (U) Several speakers were proponents of a comprehensive legal counter-attack. Mojtaba Amiri Vahid, Iranian Deputy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) mission to UN-Geneva, was the principal architect of the plan. The strategy: "indexing" (i.e. the cataloging of press and politicians who promote Islamophobia for eventual financial and societal expulsion), sponsorship of legally-binding resolutions against religiously-motivated incitement, and filing myriad OIC-funded lawsuits in respective "centers of abuse." In the near-term, OIC lawyers and attorneys from the Association of Muslim Lawyers would provide the legal work gratis, and in the long-term joint OIC-NGO universities would

be established to "produce pupils who know the domestic culture and who can argue in the language of the West."

¶7. (U) Differing slightly from Vahid, Deputy President of the Egyptian Society of International Law Ali Elghatit focused on the one hand on the need for new legislation, claiming that traditional resolutions (e.g. The UN Convention on Human Rights) were insufficient. Chairman of the Muslim Helfen Institute Ahmed Von Denffer, on the other hand, suggested working within the existing body of law; "there is no dearth of international law, it is the subjective application that is racist." Massoud Shadjareh, Chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), claimed that the battle against both process and substance should wait until a change in perception occurs. "We need to portray ourselves as the Jews have, as victims." Muslims are a religious minority, and need to make common cause with all religious minorities. Courts will then look upon Muslims as a protected class, he argued.

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Comments  
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¶8. (SBU) The concise blueprint to counter anti-Islamic actions in the West espoused by conference organizers and speakers clearly resonated with the audience and has a good chance of directing attention away from needed social and political reforms in the Islamic world. Increasing the visibility of real or imagined anti-Muslim actions in the West will stir up emotions on both sides and likely drive a wedge between moderates seeking a real middle ground. If the proponents of this "blueprint" are successful, academics and educated Muslims might feel a lesser need to engage in meaningful internal debate and will tend to blame their societal problems solely on external forces.  
WIENER